

BRONWYN SCOTT



ARABIAN NIGHTS
WITH A RAKE

Undone!

Arabian Nights with a Rake

Bronwyn Scott



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Algerian Desert, 1833

Held captive in a Bedouin camp, Susannah Sutcliffe was bid to dress in scandalous silks and dance for the sheikh's guests. The request wasn't new to Susannah—but the presence of English diplomat Alex Grayfield was a shock she had not anticipated!

Handsome and charming, Alex exuded a powerful masculinity that Susannah found irresistible...and he was unmistakably aroused by her sensual dance. Soon, Susannah had a plan to escape her desert captors: convince Alex to rescue her—by seducing *him*...

To: All those readers who have taken the time to write and share their enjoyment of the Ramsden brothers over the last two years. And to the fabulous team at Harlequin Mills & Boon whose guidance makes each book shine from the gorgeous covers to what's inside.

And always for my family.

Alex and Susannah's story was so much fun to write! Alex is a rugged intellectual which gave him a very sexy edge. He seemed the perfect comrade for Crispin Ramsden. The idea to set the story in the desert sprang from a remark Crispin makes in his story, *Untamed Rogue, Scandalous Mistress*, about how he acquired his horse. I thought it would be intriguing to use an Undone to explore where Crispin has been during his three year absence from England. This adventure in the desert seemed ideal.

I hope you enjoy the backdrop for the story. Many of my readers are like me and love to learn something from the books they read. For those folks, here's a great chance to learn about desert life; the moussems, the souk, the relationship between camels and horses, are all as authentic as I could make them. For history lovers, I based Alex and Crispin's foray into the desert specifically around the events happening after the French take over Algiers. Abd al-Qadir was a real historical figure and was considered a great hero in Algerian history for his rebellion against the French, which was indeed staged from Mascara.

Enjoy, and keep reading!

Drop by and say hi on my blog www.bronwynswriting.blogspot.com

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Chapter I

Northern Desert of Algeria, May, 1833

Alex Grayfield unwrapped the long lengths of his turban and breathed a deep lungful of night air, expelling it with a long “Ahhh.” On the nearing horizon, the flickering of torch lights illuminated a massive array of tents, a Bedouin village rising from the sands. The faint sounds of music and laughter beckoned welcomingly across the distance. He took another deep breath and closed his eyes in satisfaction. Beside him, Crispin Ramsden’s horse shifted on the sands.

“Do you smell what I smell?” Alex exhaled almost reverently. God, he loved the desert. Out here, he was free.

“Trouble?” Crispin gave a low chuckle.

“Women.”

“Is there a difference?”

They laughed together in the rising darkness, spurring their horses forward, both of them eager to arrive at the encampment now that the journey was nearly done. Algiers, with its narrow streets and smells of fish and coffee, was two days behind them, the edge of the desert before them.

“You can’t really smell them at this distance.” Crispin challenged good-naturedly, pulling his horse alongside.

“Can’t you?” Alex couldn’t resist the gibe. He smiled. “I can smell incense and wine, meat roasting in its own juices on a spit. Only women can conjure such delicious smells.”

“Where there’s a woman, there’s danger.” Crispin warned and not without reason. Europe was littered with his bedroom intrigues.

“Well, you would know best on that score.” Alex shrugged. “There’s bound to be danger anyway, women notwithstanding.” Their journey into the desert was no pleasure trip. He and Crispin had been sent to this gathering of Bedouins to take the political temperature of the nomads.

Algiers had capitulated to the French, and Britain wanted to know if there was anything to be gained by supporting the desert rebels rallying against the French occupation. Guerrilla forces under the Emir of Mascara, Abd al Qadir, were already amassed and established after their victory. In November, the emir's army had stopped a French advance into the desert. Buoyed by the emir's success, would others join the fight to liberate Algiers? If so, perhaps Britain might covertly assist in an attempt to offset the growing power of French colonialism. Alex knew as well as Crispin the import of their mission. He who controlled the desert controlled North Africa.

"Do we have a connection or are we just showing up and hoping we aren't killed on the spot?" Crispin turned the conversation towards more serious issues now that their appearance at the camp was imminent. They weren't the first team to attempt to arrive here, although they might be the first team to arrive intact. Six months ago, Lord Sutcliffe's entourage, including his daughter, had set out from Algiers. But they'd never arrived at their destination. The entire group was presumed most tragically dead.

"Your Arabic is fluent enough to pass," Crispin mused, "but no one would believe I was anything other than an Englishman once I opened my mouth."

"They might think you're French and that would be far worse." Alex joked.

Crispin's French was impeccable and had been immensely useful in the circles they had penetrated in Algiers. But it was Alex's Arabic—compliments of growing up as a British diplomat's son in Cairo—that they'd rely on out here in the desert.

"We have an introduction to Sheikh Muhsin ibn Bitar through my father's connections in Algiers," Alex offered. Beyond that, it was too complicated to explain the circuitous network of friendships so common to the way of life in the Arab world.

Crispin nodded, not expecting more detail. Like Alex, Crispin had had enough experience in this part of the world to know how things worked. An introduction would be all they needed. This gathering was a happy occasion. A *moussem* like this one brought the wandering tribes together for a celebration and the exchange of news. It would be a prime opportunity to hear from many tribes at once.

Truth be told, Alex was looking forward to the *moussem*. There would be food and dancing, competitions and music. They approached the outer circle of tents and Alex smiled. If he was charming and careful, there'd be women too. Ah, life was good.

She would get one chance to escape. If she was over-careful, she'd miss her opportunity. If she was over-hasty...well those consequences were too horrific to contemplate.

Susannah Sutcliffe eased back into the tent, letting the flap fall discreetly. For six months, since her father's death in a desert skirmish, she'd lived in the awkward limbo of the captive-slave. Muhsin ibn Bitar desired her greatly, which meant she'd not been sorely used in labor. But it also meant she owed him her gratitude. So far, she'd been able to satisfy him with entertainments and sitting at his feet during his meals.

They both knew those acts were nothing more than an extended prelude to his final seduction. He would not be put off any longer. He'd told her as much when they'd set out for the gathering. If she did not please him by the end of the *moussem* she would be given to another. That other was likely his brother-in-law, Bassam.

Susannah shuddered at the thought. Bassam was a man known for his love of diverse pleasures in the bedchamber. But neither did she prefer the company of the sheikh himself, who desired her as an earthly houri. That left only one option; taking her chances in the desert, a most dangerous option in itself. A wrong direction could lead her away from the settlements and caravan routes. It was easy to die in the desert and she would only be able to carry a few days worth of water at best.

Her plan was simple. She would steal a hardy desert horse or, if necessary, a camel and set out at night while everyone slept. With all the people here for the *moussem*, it would be hours before anyone noticed she or the beast were gone. There would be no margin for error.

She would stake it all on a single action. Camel or horse thievery was a grave crime among the Bedouin. She doubted if the sheikh's desire for her would be great enough to protect her from Bedouin justice. She would live or die on the success of her plan.

Part of her argued against taking such risk. She could stay. Surely there was no shame in pleasing the sheikh. Surely, she could bear it if it meant she could live. If she lived, there might be a better opportunity later. What

was it her father used to say? *Live to fight another day?* But he'd also been fond of saying *Never surrender*. She would face the desert and complete her father's mission. When she returned to the consulate in Algiers, she'd have the information her father had been sent to seek.

A girl slipped into the tent, holding a collection of filmy fabrics in her arms. She held them out to Susannah. "The sheikh bids you attend him. I am to wait and help you with your hair."

Susannah nodded. Her knowledge of Arabic had grown enough over the months that she understood the commands. *So the game begins*, she thought as she dressed. By English standards, the garments were scandalous, far more revealing than any good Englishwoman's nightgown. By Bedouin standards, the outfit was sumptuous. The sheikh had spared no expense. Of course, she understood it was important to put on a display of his wealth. She just didn't like being part of that display.

The girl combed out her hair, letting it hang long and loose behind her. A woman entered with a soft bag containing jewelry and placed a small gold circlet on top of her head and bracelets on her wrists. She should be used to the routine by now. This would not be the first night she had danced for the sheikh and his friends. The women who tended her had told her it was a great honor to dance for the sheikh, but she could not dismiss the feeling of being a slave led to market or a cow to slaughter. She'd not been raised to this life. She'd been a diplomat's daughter raised in a proper British household. Never in her darkest dreams had she'd thought she'd end up in a Bedouin encampment, enslaved for the personal enjoyment of a desert chieftain.

The woman held aside the flap. It was time to go, time to set aside any self-pity over her plight. It was time to survive, and to do that, she needed to dance with all the abandon she possessed, to tease and withdraw, to conjure forth every male fantasy in the tent while allowing the sheikh to believe she danced only for him.

Chapter II

Alex reclined on the pillows, propped up by an elbow. He reached for another date from the platters laid before them. A relaxed atmosphere permeated the sheikh's tent. The festival had put everyone in a generous mood. Well, almost everyone. Alex amended. One dark-eyed man with a scar on his left cheek sat brooding next to the sheikh. Bassam, Alex thought his name was. The enormous tent was filled to capacity with guests, it had been hard to keep all the names straight. He'd remembered the important ones.

There was a movement at the back of the tent and the sheikh clapped his hands for attention.

"There's to be dancing," Alex translated with a grin for Crispin.

"Did you save me a waltz on your dance card?" Crispin replied drily.

Alex laughed. "It's to be the sheikh's favorite. I do think I prefer this kind of dancing. I just get to sit here and watch. No dance cards, no introductions, no expectations."

"No matchmaking mamas, either." Crispin put in.

"There's a reason I eschew England." Alex had been about to say more but the drums began, drowning out his voice. He doubted he could have spoken anyway. The dancer had carefully navigated her way through the crowd to the open spot in front of the sheikh and even now spun before him in a whirl of turquoise silk, her pale-gold hair as much a seductive curtain as the transparent veiling she teased with.

Gold hair.

The sheikh's favorite was not a dark-eyed woman of the desert. She looked English, but looks could be misleading. She might be any number of European nationalities. Alex shot a quick glance in Crispin's direction. Only a slight movement of his eyes gave any indication he'd also noticed. It wouldn't do for them to show any outward sign of curiosity.

The dancer's movements slowed, her hands moving to draw attention to the undulation of her hips, the exposed, sculpted flatness of her stomach; her hands drifted upwards, drawing Alex's eyes to the fullness of her

breasts encased in a jeweled top. The woman was exquisite, there was little wonder she was the favorite. But with her pale hair and skin, she was decidedly not one of the Bedouin, nor was she Arab.

Whatever and whoever she was, she was positively intoxicating; her subtle scents of sandalwood and roses teasing his nostrils. His body hardened in visceral response to the promise of her sensuality. Her lips parted, a secret smile playing across them, eyes as blue as the Mediterranean met his over the transparent rim of her veils, promising all nature of erotic fulfillment as if she danced solely for him.

Yet there was a provocative innocence in those eyes, creating the impression that this was no jaded concubine expertly tantalizing men but a passionate woman in waiting, perhaps begging to be awakened to love's pleasures. Alex's arousal grew in damning proportions at the prospect, at the fantasy, of taking such a woman to his bed, to teach her, to share with her the exotic mysteries of sex.

Then she was gone, her attentions returning to the sheikh, but the fantasy remained, a potent loiterer in his mind. Later in the evening when the torches burned low and only a few men remained in the tent to discuss news, Alex asked with a feigned nonchalance, "Where did the woman come from?"

"Still in her thrall?" The sheikh gave a commiserating laugh. "She enchants every man, does she not?"

"She is lovely, indeed." Alex agreed, schooling his own features in the dimness of the tent to hide any sign of his own desire. But the sheikh had not answered his question and Alex wanted his answer. "How did you come by her?"

The grim man with the scar leaned forward to speak. "My brother-in-law does not share his concubines. She is not available to you if that's what you're asking."

Alex felt Crispin's languid repose transform into alertness. Alex took the man's measure easily. Bassam was jealous. Bassam wanted the lovely concubine for himself.

"She is a spoil of war, nothing more." The sheikh offered benevolently. "Please, have some more wine."

Englishmen! Englishmen were here, and not just any Englishman, but Alex Grayfield, the Blond Bedouin. She'd only seen him once when she'd

traveled to Cairo with her father, but those green eyes could belong to no other. Susannah's heart beat rapidly with excitement, in part over the prospect of rescue and in large part over the presence of a man whose very presence exuded power and sexuality. In the dark privacy of her tent, Susannah gave herself over to the memory.

He'd looked upon her boldly tonight, living up to his reputation. His eyes had answered hers as she'd danced with a message of passion every bit as sensual as the one she was meant to convey.

Her body tingled in remembrance. The sheer male physicality of him had been overpowering even in a tent full other men. Beneath his flowing robes, there'd been no mistaking the breadth of his shoulders or the strength of his body even in repose. Power resided in that body as surely as intelligence lit his mind. There'd been no doubt that his gaze had studied her, his sharp green eyes seducing her. She'd never been more aware of herself as a woman than she'd been in those few moments when she danced before him, their eyes meeting over her veil.

I want you, those eyes had said. But for all the ways in which he'd riveted her, she had entranced him as well. A woman did not need to be a whore to know when a man desired her, and now she sought to turn his desire to her advantage.

Alex Grayfield's arrival changed everything. She could avoid the dangers of traveling the desert alone if she could persuade him to take her with him. Providing, of course, she could persuade the sheikh to let her go.

No. The sheikh would never simply let her go. Susannah sank down on the low cot that served as her bed. She had to think. Asking to be set free was far too direct. If asking were a viable alternative, she would have asked months ago. She had to be subtle. She'd learned the value of subtlety during her time among the Bedouin. In the beginning, she'd taken what she'd hoped to be the quickest route to freedom—being so troublesome to the sheikh that he'd let her go out of sheer frustration. But those rash acts had only served to prick his pride and make her situation worse. The sheikh had to be maneuvered carefully.

Susannah absently peeled off her veils, her mind perusing her options. What was it her father had always said about diplomacy? The successful diplomat knew how to play to a man's strengths, how to praise a man's assets. She'd learned too that assets weren't always material items but sometimes characteristics.

The sheikh viewed himself as a man generous with his hospitality. And he was, when it came to political generosity. She'd danced at enough of his entertainments to know there was truth in that. He lavished his best food and drink on merchants and their caravans when their paths crossed. In return, she was certain he received the most accurate news and insights the merchants brought with them.

Politics were heating up the desert. This *moussem* was a festival, but it would also be a chance for the remaining tribes to decide if they'd throw in their lots with the Emir of Mascara. There was danger here too for the English whether they knew it or not. The sheikh did not support the emir and, by extension, he did not support the English. He would want to determine what the English meant by this visit. To do that, he would court them. But he could not court the English with his traditional largesse of figs and wineskins or the occasional camel. The English had no use for the standard luxuries of the desert.

The sheikh would need a gift substantially more English than that to impress his visitors. He needed *her*. She was the most English gift the sheikh possessed. The sheikh needed to be made to see that returning her out of bondage, and restoring her to her people would be a sign of his 'western thinking,' a chance to convince the English the Bedouin were not nomadic barbarians, but people of a certain civility who should be left to their own devices.

Susannah reached for a thin cotton shift and pulled it over her head. It was the only truly English garment left to her. Her other clothes had been taken from her that first humiliating day. She wore only what the sheikh provided and at his behest. Putting on her shift had become something of a nightly ritual, a homecoming of sorts, a chance to be an Englishwoman for a few hours instead of this man's fantasy slave.

Making herself a gift was a good idea. It would play to the sheikh's view of himself as a generous lord of the sands. She was astute enough to know the suggestion could not come from her. It would have to come from Grayfield. He had not bothered to hide his interest in her. Such boldness would make his request believable, but it could also be used as leverage against him. He'd best tread carefully lest Bassam and the sheikh see an opportunity to exploit that desire before she could. If she could bind him to her, he would be more likely to take her away regardless of the risk or the permission.

She needed to move quickly. Susannah covered her shift with a dark robe and belted it. She reached for a veil to hide the sheen of her hair. The camp would be busy. With luck she would pass unnoticed, but if questioned, she could say she was on her way to the sheikh's tent. Her decision was made and she did not want to delay. It would be harder to arrange an opportunity to encounter the Englishmen tomorrow.

Susannah took a deep breath and slipped out into the night. She was off to make her 'suggestion' to Grayfield, and as with any suggestion, the idea would need to be planted in order for it to take root.

Chapter III

Alex was dreaming of houris, or rather of one houri in particular. Even in sleep he did not quite forget that he was an Englishman who favored monogamy. In his dream, he reclined on a couch, pillows behind his head, a goblet of wine at his arm and the woman of his evening fantasies dancing before him. Her hips swayed in a provocative prelude. She came closer, the rose and sandalwood scent of her wreathing him in sensuality.

She bent over him, her long curtain of hair sweeping his chest, her naked breasts brushing his bare skin with dusky-hued nipples. She whispered a throaty promise he couldn't quite hear. If he raised his head just an inch he could kiss those tantalizing lips, and then move on to those delectable breasts.

He levered himself on one arm to cover the small distance, his mouth taking the invitation of her lips. She tasted of honey and surprise, a gasp escaping her in a short exhalation of breath. Instinctively, he reached out an arm to steady her, meaning to draw her firmly to him. He met with unexpected resistance. In Islamic mysticism the houris didn't resist. This was an odd dream indeed.

Or no dream at all. Alex's eyes flew open. Oh the woman was very real, that part was in no doubt. He woke to find himself holding the sheikh's favorite about the slender curve of her waist, the fullness of her breasts illumined through the thin cotton of her chemise by the flickering light of the tent's lantern. The deep rose of her nipples had been no figment of imagination either. The chemise offered her very little protection against the proximity of his gaze and the lantern-cast shadows.

The resistance hadn't been feigned either. Her body was tense within his embrace, her eyes questioning and wary. Her plans for him had plainly gone awry. The very thought raised Alex's well-honed sense of suspicion. He hadn't survived this long on luck alone. In his world, nothing was freely given.

Whatever she'd planned, it hadn't been seduction, more was the pity. Alex slackened his grip and she backed away. For a moment, he feared she

would bolt. He moved his grip to her wrist, shackling it easily with his hand.

“What are you doing in my quarters?” His voice was harsh, demanding an answer. In the dim light he searched her for evidence of a weapon, to no avail. She was too scantily dressed to conceal anything on her person and her other hand was clenched into an empty fist.

Her gaze shifted infinitesimally to the dark heap on the floor—a cloak most likely, a covering that had been discarded on purpose, leaving her virtually naked to his gaze. Another man might rethink the possibility of seduction, but Alex had been schooled in the Persian world where not all was what it seemed on the surface. His first inclination had been correct. She’d not come to seduce. If she had, she would not have resisted his overture. She would have entered the game boldly with his awakening.

“Release me.” She ordered, matching his demand with an admirable hauteur of her own. Definitely an Englishwoman, Alex decided. He could hear it in her voice and in her defiance. He’d known many women from many backgrounds in his time and had yet to meet any except perhaps the Americans who matched an Englishwoman in boldness when cornered.

“I want answers.” He replied. “What have you come here for? Is it the custom of the sheikh to send uninvited women to his guests’ tents?” If she said yes, he’d know she was lying. It might indeed be the sheikh’s custom; he’d met tribes where the practice was not uncommon as an act of hospitality. But the sheikh would not send his favorite, not after what Alex had witnessed in Bassam’s response earlier that night.

She tossed her magnificent length of hair in a haughty maneuver. “I came to talk.” She shot her eyes at his hand gripping her wrist.

“Naked? I was unaware of that particular desert custom.” She might have been better off with the sent-by-the-sheikh-defense after all.

Her blue eyes flashed. “It’s the truth.” She tugged against his grip in her irritation. “I have no reason to lie to you.”

“I have no reason to believe you. Perhaps the sheikh has sent you to ferret out my secrets, my reasons for being here. It is convenient for you to come while I’m alone.” Alex raised a querying brow. “All the better for conquering and dividing, eh?”

“That’s ridiculous logic.” She spat. “Why would the sheikh send an Englishwoman to a compatriot? It would be tantamount to asking us to conspire against him.”

“Would it?” Alex shrugged with feigned nonchalance, his mind rapidly sorting and discarding scenarios. What did she want that she would steal into a sleeping man’s quarters and stand before him virtually unclothed? “Perhaps the sheikh has offered you something of value in exchange for whatever services he’s sent you to perform.” He raked her body deliberately with his eyes. There was no mistaking what ‘services’ he suspected she offered.

“I’m not here to seduce you.” She stammered, her nerve failing her for a moment. Alex watched her realize how exposed she was to his gaze, how little the fabric hid and how much the candle showed. “I’m here to talk.”

“Then let’s talk.” Alex smiled wickedly, rising from the bed of blankets, the coverlet slipping from his body to reveal the unabashed glory of a naked man, aroused and not the least bit self-conscious over it. Indeed, there was nothing to be embarrassed about. His body was tanned from the tawny streaks in his blond hair to the muscled curves of his calves, implying that he engaged in nakedness quite often to have acquired so even a tan. Not even his buttocks had hidden from the sun’s kiss. The thought brought a blush to her cheeks.

He stalked her, circling on purpose, with a wicked smile. “Nakedness can be a bit distracting....”

Stopping his pacing, he eyed her critically. “Is that why you dressed thus for our ‘talk,’ my dear? Did you mean to distract me with your charms while you did whatever it was you meant to do? That part of your plan is working admirably, as you can see.” He cast an obvious glance downwards to his engorged member.

She blushed furiously, desperately. He could see the flush of her skin even in the dim light. The act was entirely winsome and convincingly pure. It kept him unusually off balance. It seemed he’d discomfited the little temptress. Well, good. She needed to know there were consequences for her actions, for her as well as for him. Two could play this enticing game of ‘naked interrogation.’

“Distract you? To what end?” She challenged, finding her wits. “I carry no weapon with which to do you harm.” She protested, holding her arms wide from her side. “As you have noted, I have no place to conceal a weapon.”

Alex knew the gesture cost her greatly. She knew by now how visibly exposed she was to him, that her modesty had been surrendered from the

beginning and he'd made her acutely aware of it. She played the voluptuous, pure houri of the Koran so exquisitely, Alex nearly believed her. He'd seen the same innocence before as she'd danced. But no innocent came so wantonly displayed.

He began circling her again. "No weapon? I beg to differ, my lady. You, in and of yourself, are the most perfect of weapons for driving a man to distraction and much else."

In a swift move, he fettered her wrists in his grasp, lifting them immobile over her head. She gasped, her eyes wide with startled wonder and perhaps a little fear. Had someone threatened her in the past? Alex met her gaze with a knowing smile, recognizing the first signs of her passionate cravings. He was not the only one affected by their game. Desire enlarged the dark pupils of her eyes. Even now he caught the essence of her arousal mingled with the scent of her roses, her wonder winning out over whatever she feared.

"Shall I show you all the ways you distract a man?" His voice was a husky whisper, meant to compel. Dexterously, Alex slid the buttons of the chemise free of their loops, giving his hand access to the warm skin beneath. His hand skimmed the length of her torso, feeling her tremble beneath the stroking caress before returning to cup each full breast, taking them by turn completely in the palm of his hand. He ran the pad of his thumb ever so lightly over the peaks of her breasts, calling them to life beneath his caress.

"What are you doing to me?" she managed, her voice nothing more than a sob of pleasure.

He whispered close to her ear, his attentions turned now to her throat. "Making love to you." His mouth dropped to her breasts, suckling, delighting in her untutored response, part shock at the intimacy of the act and part honest woman enjoying the passion. "A man would do anything to claim this body," God knew he would, was in fact about to do just that no matter the risk. He was blind to all else in these moments but the bounty before him. He was nearly driven to the brink of his control by the firm fruits of her breasts, the scent of her, the innocent responses of her body. Houri, spy, sheikh's tool, increasingly, he cared not.

"Let go off my hands." She begged with a whimper, her desire mounting to the point of insensibility.

He nipped at her neck. “No, I like you entirely at my disposal. You like it too, your body admits it, your body trusts me, let your mind do the same.” He reached around her, drawing her against him with one arm so that she could feel his erection against her bare skin. He kissed her full on the mouth, stifling her pro forma protests as his hand dropped to between her legs. Her mouth opened under his with a silent gasp of pleasure. Christ, she was beautiful.

“Thus it shall be, that we shall pair, in these gardens will be mates of modest gaze whom neither man nor invisible being will have touched ere then.” He quoted between kisses, his breathing heavy. There was a reason the Koran equated the houris of Muslim lore with an ecstatic awareness of Allah.

She cried out, taken by early waves of pleasure and Alex knew all resistance had been swept aside in the wake of her passions. He would take her, and they would know mutual fulfillment together this night, whatever other less-pleasant agendas lay between them.

Susannah was oblivious to all else but the feel of Alex’s hands on her body, coaxing it to extraordinary levels of pleasure. He covered her entirely, all thoughts of her plans and escapes fleeing her mind in the wake of this new world of ecstasy.

Alex rose above her, golden and strong, his knee parting her thighs with little opposition, the desire in his gaze mesmerizing. Then he shifted, his body lowering, entering her, surging hard into her until she cried out. She was full of him and yet, arching her body wantonly into his, it still wasn’t enough. Suddenly there was pain, a shocking realization amid all the pleasure.

She cried out against it, but he was already pressing forward and when the recognition hit him, it was too late. A look of surprise crossed his features, his body stilled momentarily inside her, but passions were too high for them to stop. Even now the pain was subsiding and her body reached for the promise of awaiting pleasure. Her legs wrapped about his waist, trapping him to her, “Please,” Susannah whispered.

It was all the invitation Alex needed. His body answered the call to passion, full-sheathed within her, until climax took her and she cried her release into his shoulder, feeling him shudder deep inside her.

Chapter IV

A pessimist would say she had been carried away. An optimist would argue her plan had succeeded, Susannah mused. Rational thought made a slow return to the dim confines of the tent. Now that she had Alex's attention she scarcely knew what to do with it. Her plan had been based on solid assumptions; he wanted her. But she'd had no idea how far his wanting would take things. Or for that matter, how far *her* wanting would leave her vulnerable to him. Her own responses had been utterly surprising. Alex dozed lightly beside her. Soon, she'd have to wake him. She did not yet have what she'd come to the tent for.

But for now, she wanted to enjoy watching her lover sleep. *Lover*. The term implied that the encounter was more than a physical mating. In addition to his prowess, she recognized in retrospect there'd been an underlying care present in his lovemaking. He'd been sensitive to her needs, wanting her to find her own pleasure, wanting to alleviate her brush with pain. She had not expected that to be the case. Her encounters with the sheikh and with Bassam had suggested the act of sex was solely a male exercise in physical fulfillment at the female's expense. Perhaps that explained why she'd managed to thwart physical consummation for months, and yet had capitulated within moments to Alex.

Alex stirred and woke, taking her in with his eyes, a slow smile on his lips. He traced a lazy line over the curve of her hip and kissed her on the forehead before giving a sigh. "It seems we've done everything but what you came here to do," He sounded regretful to be pulling them back into reality. "Perhaps now would be a good time to talk."

Talk. The word struck a chord of trepidation within her.

It occurred to her that she had not told her story to anyone before. The tragedy in the desert had been a grief she'd borne silently these past months. How to unearth all that now and share it with this man who, in spite of their intimacy, was a virtual stranger?

Alex offered a gentle prompt. "Why don't we start with your name. You know mine, but I feel woefully disadvantaged."

Her name would change everything. Clearly, he hadn't known beforehand. He had not come here to save her or to look for her, confirming her suspicion that the British Consul believed her entire party to be dead. It was too much to hope for that anyone had come looking for her. She'd given up on that particular fantasy months ago. It was expensive and risky to send search parties into the desert. Besides, the chances of anyone knowing she was alive were minimal; the sands left no clues, no trails.

There was no escaping recognition. He would know her father's name. On one hand, it would help her cause. The Blond Bedouin would not leave Sutcliffe's daughter in the desert. But it would potentially alter their passion. Would he feel obligated to her? She understood what she'd become in the desert. This interlude, although not of her making, had put her outside English Society. She wanted no man's pity. That was what her logical mind feared. Her heart feared something else: Would he decline to make love to her again out of a retroactive display of old-fashioned honor? Already, her body wanted him again. Once with Alex Grayfield simply wasn't enough.

Susannah swallowed hard and took her chances. "My name is Susannah. Susannah Sutcliffe."

"Ah," came the reply. A small word to carry such import. In that *ah* was the recognition she'd predicted and the dawning realization of what they'd done, of what *he'd* done. He might have been raised in the desert lands, but she could see the English wheels of his mind working in reaction to this latest revelation.

"I know a little of your circumstance," he began. "Sutcliffe's entourage set out from Algiers shortly after the battle in November but no correspondence ever came verifying Sutcliffe's arrival in Mascara. The plan had been to journey from Algiers to Mascara, calling on the tribes that lay between the two cities."

"Is that your mission as well?" Susannah's gaze shot upwards to meet Alex's eyes.

Alex shrugged noncommittally. Even now, he did not entirely confide in her. "You will need to trust me before this is over," she said abruptly, picking up the story where Alex had left it. "Perhaps this part of the story will help with that. My father's entourage was ambushed by the sheikh's raiders. You will be killed too if he learns you're here to see if the tribes will join with the emir."

Alex gave no outward acknowledgment of her warning.

“And you? What happens to you in all this drama?” He traced slow, tantalizing circles on her skin. This was her chance. She would never get a more perfect opening.

She leaned forward boldly and kissed him on the mouth. “Take me with you when you go. I am a slave to the sheikh. Ask for me as a gift.” she whispered.

“And if that fails? I do not see the sheikh being eager to part with you.”

“Find another way. I understand I ask no small thing.” Susannah drew back slightly, meeting his gaze with as much dignity as she could summon while naked in his bed. “Nothing matters except that you take me with you. I did not come to you as a tool of the sheikh’s to discover your motives for being here. I have warned you. I might even claim that I’ve saved your life by doing so and that you owe me a life in return.”

“The law of the desert,” Alex murmured, the hot emerald coals of his eyes stoked to life. “A life for a life.”

“And I choose mine as the price for yours.” Susannah answered.

“You shall have it.” Alex whispered, his mouth hovering inches above hers. “When we depart the *moussem*, you shall come with us. You have my word on it, my very mouth on it.” He sealed his vow with a kiss.

Susannah reached for him, feeling him rise against the contact of her palm. Ah good, his body was in agreement.

Alex made some move to protest, but Susannah hushed him with a gentle finger to his lips and a shake of her head. “I do not want your protestations of honor, Alex. There’s nothing to scourge your conscience over.” She pulled him to her, her body eager to be claimed. She felt him give himself over to the pleasure building between them. For the moment her absolution was enough. Only a fool would keep Paradise waiting, and Alex Grayfield demonstrated that he was a very wise man indeed.

She would remember that kissing vow, Susannah thought later, slipping out to the privacy of her own tent. There were things more binding than words or contracts. Alex was not alone in his desire. It was something of a surprise that the ties bound both ways. In her naïveté, she had not looked ahead to the potential of forming her own attachment. She had thought to lure him with sex—it was, after all, the only currency available to her in the sheikh’s camp. She had not thought to enjoy him in a way that went beyond the sensual. Alex Grayfield had been on display tonight in ways that transcended his naked body. He’d shown her sensitivity where her pleasure

was concerned, and he'd shown interest in her thoughts and in her person. He'd asked about her captivity in a way that separated that ordeal from its impact on the political situation. Those lures were, in fact, equally as potent as the temptations offered by his body, and in some ways, more so. In her experience, rare was the man who put others' needs above his own. That was a powerful lure indeed.

She'd known Alex Grayfield's presence would change things, but she hadn't known just how pervasive that change would be. It would be easy to love him. When she'd formulated her plan, such a consequence had been most unlooked for.

Not that it would matter. What man would want a woman who'd danced as she had? She was a suitable companion for a few nights of passion. But a suitable wife? She was realist enough to know those chances were gone. It was a sobering thought.

Soon she'd be free. The desert could be left behind, but the stigma of her captivity could not. She had not allowed herself to think of life beyond the desert. But now she must if freedom was imminent. She could start a new life with the remaining threads of her old one; she had connections, money and her father's name to trade on, but what Society would receive her? Certainly not England's. Whatever new life she cobbled together would have to be far from English shores, and she would most likely have to be alone.

Chapter V

“The sheikh does not wish to defeat the French?” Crispin rose from his couch, digesting Alex’s news the following morning while they broke their fast on yoghurt and dates.

Alex relayed what Susannah had told him the night before. “Sheikh Bitar sees the French as an affront to the traditional way of life. But more than that, Bitar sees al Qadir as a tyrant. Those who do not come to his standard willingly will be subjugated. That makes Qadir no better than the French in the sheikh’s eyes.”

“But perhaps more resistible,” Crispin surmised the implications quickly. “It would be easier to undermine the emir’s efforts and take a chance on the French being unable to control what really went on in the desert.”

Alex nodded, that had been his conclusion last night as well. “It would be an incredible feat to join the tribes into a unified force. The emir’s efforts are unlikely to succeed. The tribes have spent their histories fighting each other and now the emir wants them to be friends.”

If the sheikh prevented the English from offering support to the emir, the army he was raising might not defeat the French. There was nothing like defeat to dampen the willingness of men to fight. Without an army, al Qadir was nothing, just a powerless potentate, and Bitar was betting the French would leave the Bedouin alone in the desert.

Crispin sat back down, pushing his hands through his long dark hair. “There’s a good chance the sheikh’s right. The French can claim to own the territory on a map, but in actuality, it will be difficult to impose rule in such a vast and harsh land. He’d rather take his chances with the French than with Abd al Qadir.”

“It’s too bad. If anyone can unite the tribes, it’s the emir. From what I know of the man, he’s a holy man, a decent man. Innovative too. He’s styled his army after the European fashion. He wants his people educated in western ways. The people who have joined him see the merit of these additions.”

“But Muhsin Bitar does not.” Crispin sighed. “It would be best if he doesn’t suspect our real reason for being here, although two Englishmen wandering in the desert is bound to raise questions.” Crispin thought for a moment. “We’ll tell Bitar we’re horse traders. A *moussem* is perfect for discovering new horses. Perhaps that will give us alibi enough for being here and persuade him we’re not politicking.”

He winked at Alex. “I do hope to make the alibi a fact in truth, however. The sheikh has a prime goer, the black. The blasted horse sleeps in the sheikh’s own tent. Can you imagine that?”

Alex smiled at the look on Crispin’s face. “It’s because of the camels. Horses can’t stand the smell of them, it makes them high-strung, hard to handle.”

“Like a woman,” Crispin commented wryly. Alex chose to let the deliberate hint slide. Beyond political necessity, he wasn’t ready to talk about Susannah and what had transpired last night.

“I must start thinking of a way to charm it out of him, persuade him to make a gift of it.” Crispin mused out loud.

“I think there are better ‘gifts’ to ask for. It goes without saying that she wants to come with us.” Alex interjected.

Crispin fixed him with a knowing stare. “I was wondering when we’d get around to this. Can we trust her?”

Alex shrugged. “Does it matter? She’s an English captive being held against her will. But yes, there’s little reason not to trust her.”

Crispin gave a cynical laugh. “She’s a woman, Alex, you can’t really trust any of them. But let’s hope you’ve found the rare gem. After all, she knows now that we’re here to discover where allegiances lie. All she has to do is tell the sheikh and we’re on the run. And she’ll have whatever it is the sheikh has promised her. Her freedom perhaps?”

Alex bristled at Crispin’s implication. “We *can* trust her. She only knew about our mission because it was her father’s mission before it was ours. She needs us alive.”

Crispin nodded, content to accept Alex’s analysis. “Assuming you’re right, how are we going to get her out of here?”

Alex grinned. “There’re only two options, really, Cris. Either we convince Bitar to give her to us as a gift or we steal her and ride like hell.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that. I guess we might as well take the horse while we’re at it. In for a penny, in for a pound. Do you think the

Crown will ever forgive us for this one? Stealing women, stealing horses. Our skills grow illustrious, dear friend.”

Alex chuckled. “Your brother’s an earl, they’ll forgive you anything. It’s me I’m worried about.”

“Ha, you’ll be the prince charming in all this, riding out of the desert with the missing diplomat’s daughter riding pillion behind you. It’s the stuff of ballads. I can see it now, ‘The Lay of Alex and Susannah’ sung in all of London’s finest pubs.”

“Leave it, Cris, she’s a diplomat’s daughter.”

“Being a diplomat’s daughter doesn’t make her a nun.” Crispin countered.

“She is not a houri. She is Susannah Sutcliffe, Lord Sutcliffe’s daughter, and I’ll thank you to speak about her with respect.” Alex bristled.

Crispin looked at him sharply and raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. I don’t think I’ve ever heard you so on edge about a woman. It rather sounds like there’s more to you and Miss Susannah than meets the eye.”

Alex rose, blithely ignoring Crispin’s comment. “I need to take care of some things. I’ll see you shortly at the sheikh’s tent. I think he has some competitions lined up for today.” Crispin and he had worked together for two years. His friend was eminently trustworthy and quite the finest man he’d ever partnered with, but for some reason Alex did not want such crass witticisms slandering his encounter with Susannah.

Alex wandered the *moussem’s souk*, pausing every so often to admire the merchant’s booths and their goods on display at the fair. He stopped at a booth selling creams and purchased a small pot. The rose scent reminded him of Susannah.

Ah, Susannah. She’d occupied a fair share of his thoughts since last night. Their interlude had been entirely other-worldly, but increasingly it was hard to keep the real-world implications from intruding.

He was on difficult ground. Alex had lain awake long after Susannah had left. He’d meant to spend the night thinking over diplomatic issues, but his thoughts had continuously drifted back to her. When it had been a game of desire, of bodies speaking to one another in the timeless language of seduction, who she was had not been a consideration. She’d simply been a woman, passionate and bold. He’d been a man, answering the lure of her body. It had been simple and primal in the darkness of the tent.

Then he'd asked her name and reality had struck. She was an Englishman's daughter. Not just any Englishman's daughter. There were Englishmen and then there were *Englishmen*. Her father had been of the latter category.

Lord Sutcliffe was no meager player in British affairs. He'd been considered a top-notch diplomat when it came to the Empire in North Africa. Alex's father had met with him on occasion over Egyptian affairs. Alex had admired him as a hero during his years growing up in Cairo. No other man in the Empire had possessed Sutcliffe's depth of knowledge concerning the varied peoples of North Africa.

To be set upon by the mercenaries of Sheikh Bitar was an ignoble death for anyone, particularly one so decorated in life. For Sutcliffe's daughter to be made a captive and subjugated to who-knew-what atrocities was an intolerable slap in the face to the Empire's pride, but Alex's body burned for a personal vengeance against Bitar and Bassam. What had they subjected Susannah to during her captivity? A woman did not have to be bedded to be debased and there'd been a moment of fear in her eyes last night when he'd grabbed her.

Seldom had a woman's attentions claimed him so completely. Alex was struck anew with the power of his desire, his desire not only to possess her but to be the first and only one to do so. That desire brought him full circle in his thoughts.

She was Sutcliffe's daughter and he was an Englishman bound by certain codes of conduct. In the throes of pleasure, he'd taken her virginity. By the nature of her birth and status in society, she could not be like his other casual encounters, enjoyed and cast aside when the excitement ebbed. She would surely demand from him a level of commitment he'd given no other woman. The strange thing was that, for the first time in his life, making that commitment didn't sound like such a ridiculous idea.

A horn blew in the *souk* announcing the beginning of the games. Alex turned his direction towards the big tents of the sheikh, where men were gathering for the traditional competitions. He could see Crispin's tall frame among them. It was time to act. Before he could think of what the future might hold with Susannah, he had to win her first.

Chapter VI

The activities of the *moussem* suited Alex and Crispin's purposes admirably. Games of skills and other competitions gave them a chance to build a masculine camaraderie with the other men present. They did not hesitate to participate. He and Crispin showed off their talents at knife-throwing. They looked over the horses other sheikhs had brought in hopes of races or trading, bolstering their cover as horse traders.

As night fell and the traditional hookah pipe came out to be passed and smoked in Bitar's tent, Alex felt they'd made good progress in gaining a place of acceptance. Last night, they'd been invited out of courtesy, but tonight they were part of the group, having proven their prowess and their worthiness to be accepted. Alex's mastery of Arabic had made that acceptance easier. That they were dressed in Bedouin robes and speaking the common language of the desert made it harder for Bitar to remember they did not belong. It had been a strategy that had worked well for Alex over the years and he had used it liberally today to gain acceptance for him and Crispin.

Tonight would be the test. Alex knew what the men should talk about in the tent. They *should* talk politics and the business of their tribes. If they didn't then Alex would know his acceptance was not complete. He reached for a date, using the action as an opportunity to search the tent for Susannah. He had not seen her all day. While that had been disappointing, it had not been unexpected. Her place was in the night. His body quickened in anticipation. He popped the date into his mouth, aware of Bassam's eyes on him. The man had watched him all day.

"The Emir of Mascara has invited us to join him," A man close to Alex said, addressing his comment to Bitar. "Will you journey on from here to Mascara?"

Bitar shook his head and spat, his tone derisive. "No, I will not go to join that infidel dog. He calls this a holy war, but it is nothing more than a ruse to subdue us to his will. He wishes to be more than the emir of a city. He wishes to be a king over all of us."

“Are you not worried about the French? They have taken Algiers,” another asked.

Bitar raised his arms wide to encompass the room and the world outside the expansive tent. “What is there to worry about in the desert? The French have no way to impose their law and order out here. Here, we are law and I mean to keep it that way.”

Alex nodded along with the other men in the room in a show of solidarity for the sheikh’s opinion. He shot a quick glance at Crispin, his nod conveying something entirely different. Crispin nodded back. Susannah had not lied. More than that, she had proven to be resourceful, making the most of her captivity. Her command of Arabic must be better than Alex had originally thought if she’d used her lowly position as a dancing girl to complete her father’s mission. His admiration for her increased even further. She’d demonstrated beyond doubt she was definitely her father’s daughter.

The pipe came his way and he drew deeply on it, exhaling with fervor. He did not care for the sweet smoke of the pipe but sharing the pipe was a sign of friendship, to refuse would be damning in the extreme. He passed the pipe to Crispin and the drums started. Shouts of approval rose from the men further back by the entrance and clapping began in rhythm with the drums as the dancers entered the tent.

Alex saw Susannah immediately at the head of the line. Tonight she was dressed sumptuously in red and gold, a belt of coins tinkling provocatively at her hips, tiny brass cymbals in her hands clinking out the beat of the dance.

She was enchanting. Men stared after her hungrily as she passed until she reached the space in front of Bitar. Her hands were mesmerizing, their gestures guiding the men’s gazes to her breasts beneath the red top she wore, leaving her splendid stomach uncovered to the collective gaze of the audience. Tonight, her costume left her much more exposed. The gauzy pantaloons rode seductively low on her hips, the delicate bones of her pelvis rising above the coin belt.

She danced as if she were oblivious to the eroticism of her costume, to the fact that her body was on display before men. Before him.

Desire throbbed in Alex. She might be oblivious to the gazes of other men, but he did not want her to be oblivious to him. Primal possession

surged. He wanted her to acknowledge him. It was a foolish and dangerous wish with Bassam watching, but he wanted it all the same.

Then she did. She moved slightly to her left and put herself directly in front of him, her hips swaying, her eyes promising. She would keep those promises with him tonight, Alex vowed silently.

There were cards after dancing. For all of his protestations against the inventions of Europe, Bitar had a fondness for cards. Low tables were set up among the groupings of pillows in the tent and the men settled in for a night of cards and wine, some of the dancers staying behind to enliven the games. Alex saw Crispin claim a seat at the table with Bassam and Bitar, and he took his cue to slip out. Crispin would keep the men at the table all night.

Alex slid into the night, covertly grabbing up a wineskin and an errant plate of fruit that had gone untouched. The camp was busy. Other entertainments were taking place in other tents, people eager to impress one another and to make deals while the *moussem* lasted.

He found his own tent and waited. This was the only kink his plan. He did not know where Susannah was lodged, and he could not go poking about without risk of discovery. But she'd come to him. *If she could.* The very thought of another commanding her to his bed rankled. More than rankled. That was too tame a word. The thought boiled his blood. Of course she'd come. The sheikh was at cards. He would not seek his bed until dawn.

His fears were unfounded. Moments later, Susannah pulled aside the tent flap and stepped inside, her eyes searching for him. She found him and smiled, the hood of her all-concealing robe falling back to reveal her glorious hair. "I can only stay a minute. Did you see today that I was right?" Her words were all business, but she was breathless.

Alex took her hand and drew her to him, inhaling deeply of her rose attar. "I heard the sheikh's testimony from his own lips. He, at least, will not be joining the emir." His words were business too, but his tone was not. He wanted this night for something more than politics.

"You and your friend believe me then?" Her eyes searched his face. It was touching to know that his acceptance meant so much to her.

"We believe you. I believed you last night." He cupped her cheek, the length of her hair running through his fingers like gold silk.

"I will not betray you to the sheikh." She whispered, turning her cheek into his hand to nuzzle it.

“I know. Come and eat with me. I have wine and figs.”

“I cannot stay.” There was regret in her tone. “I only have so much freedom because there’s nowhere to run in the desert. But someone may miss me. I never know when the sheikh will call for my services.”

“The sheikh will be at cards for hours. Crispin will see to it. He has a penchant to possess that horse.” Alex encouraged in low sensual tones. “We have time for other business.”

Susannah trembled. This was what she’d risked coming here for. She might tell herself it was to confirm the validity of her information, or to make sure Alex was bound to her, committed to keeping his promise, but deep inside, she knew she’d come because she’d wanted to, regardless of promises and plots. Tonight had only to do with honest want.

Alex led her to his bed and she sat cross-legged, tucking her robe around her. She still wore her decadent dancing costume underneath. She reached for a fig, but Alex forestalled her hand.

“Let me.” He took the fig and dipped it in a small pot of honey before feeding it to her. He held it above her lips, dribbling honey on them and she licked them, her heart fluttering faster in her chest, warmth pooling between her legs.

“Tease,” Alex whispered hoarsely.

She bit into the fig with a small moan of delight.

“Temptress.” He growled and she laughed, amazed to find she had such power over him.

“I had not known eating could be so enjoyable.” She bit into another offering of fruit.

With an oath, he set the tray of food aside and came up over her, covering her with his length. He kissed her full on the mouth and she reveled in the taste of him, the sweet flavor of honey and wine from the sheikh’s feast lingering on his lips.

He explored her mouth with his tongue and she responded with passion, her body urging him to taste all she offered, proving last night had been only the beginning. His hands moved beneath her robe, stilling when they met with evidence of her costume. “No chemise tonight?” he asked quietly.

She stiffened. “I didn’t have time to change.” She hesitated. “Does it repulse you?”

Alex sat back on his heels and studied her face. “You could never repulse me. I only dislike that he parades you in front of others as a sign of his hospitality.” He was kissing her again, trailing little kisses down the column of her throat, causing her pulse to race at the base of her neck. He spoke between kisses.

“When I saw you tonight, I wanted you to dance only for me. I wanted my eyes to be the only ones that watched you. I wanted to rip Bassam’s throat out for seeing you dressed like that. I wanted to carry you out of that tent and ravish you straight away.”

His hands were at the skimpy top she wore, working the clasp at the back to free her breasts. He kissed her bared nipples and she shuddered in delight. His lips traveled downwards towards her belly, stopping to kiss her navel, his hands intimately and possessively framing her body at her hips, his thumbs resting on her pelvis.

Slipping the gauzy pantaloons from her legs, his hands returned to their original positions at her hips, his chin resting lightly at her belly as he looked up at her, his green eyes dark and intent. His thumbs massaged gently as he spoke. “I mean to worship you, my beautiful Susannah.”

He did not wait for an answer but reached for the wineskin, spilling some on her breasts and her belly and suckling deeply. Susannah cried out, helplessly aroused at his audacity, acutely aware of his breath warm on her, his mouth bent to the heat at her core. Her hands tangled in his thick hair, clutching for balance, as he brought her to a shuddering wave of pleasure. She had not thought her body possessed the ability to claim such gratification.

Alex was moving over her now and she spread her legs instinctively to welcome him. Her arms twined about his neck, her legs about his waist, claiming him as her own, pushing him forward into her. She rose against him, her hips meeting his, urging him deeper. Then it began, truly began. All else had been a precursor to the great joy that awaited her. Alex drove her there and joined her, their bodies exploding together, the warmth of him filling her with great pulsing throbs as he emptied his body into hers in the most intimate of communions.

Chapter VII

“Is it always like this?” Susannah’s question was whispered in awe, an eternity later, once their bodies had settled and she lay securely in his arms.

How was he to answer that? It had never been quite like this for him either. “It can be. Sometimes it is less.” *Much less*, Alex thought to himself. He was beginning to see how his prior encounters had been limited, nothing more than a physical function of the body that brought temporary satisfaction. *This* was something else entirely. But he could hardly explain that to Susannah when he could barely explain this new wondrous thing to himself.

Susannah nodded against his shoulder, her hair tickling his nose. “I didn’t think it would be like this. I didn’t think lovemaking could be for me. I thought it was really only for the man. The sheikh...” Her voice broke off and she squirmed uncomfortably against him.

“The sheikh what?” Alex probed softly, his prior fears of what she might have endured in captivity rising to the fore. She might have come to him a virgin, but there were other ways... “Tell me, Susannah.”

“It is nothing, now. You’ve proven it can be otherwise and that’s all that matters. I won’t have you doing anything rash. What’s done can’t be undone.”

“That’s not the most compelling argument, Susannah.” Alex said grimly. “If anything, it makes me even angrier. Tell me. I am not prone to rash behavior, I can give you my word on it.”

She drew a deep breath and slowly began to spill her tale, the tale she had not shared with him last night when he’d asked: how she’d been brought before the sheikh, spared in the ambush because the captain of the raiders thought Bitar would fancy her gold hair. Bitar had indeed fancied her. He’d cleared the tent of all but his physic and ordered her to strip. It had been the last she’d seen of her clothing, and Bitar had gazed upon her naked form, lust evident in his eyes for what seemed an age. “Let us see if she’s a houri in truth,” he’d said, submitting her to the most personal and

invasive of examinations, his delight bordering on ecstasy when the physic confirmed her purity.

Alex breathed deeply beside her when she finished. "The sheikh has debased you and is responsible for the death of your father. I will kill him for you, if you like." He would too. Life and death had different meanings in the desert, and there was a part of him that was far less English than the other parts. He had killed for honor before with just cause and was not afraid to do it again should right demand it, should this vibrant woman in his arms demand it.

"I want only to put all this behind me." She answered.

His kiss was strong and firm on her neck. "Then let me love you tonight and erase those memories. The sheikh meant only to humiliate. I mean nothing of the sort." He pulled her to him and whispered out loud the litany that had run through his mind all day. "You're mine, Susannah, and no other's."

As he joined with her for a second time that night, reaching once more for ecstasy, Alex knew he wanted her in ways that transcended this bed. He wanted Susannah for her passion, for her intelligence, for her courage and strength. He wanted her forever.

You're mine and no other's. The words dared her to hope as Alex helped her into her clothing. Dawn was approaching and she could not risk staying a moment longer. The sheikh would be ending his night of cards.

"Soon, Susannah, we'll be away from here, free to make our own plans." Alex promised, settling her robes about her.

Our own plans. How nice that sounded. But she had to be fair. "You are not obligated, Alex, just because you're the one who found me."

Alex tipped her chin up so her eyes met his. "Finders, keepers, isn't that how it goes?" he teased lightly.

For how long? she wondered. He might keep her in Algiers as a mistress perhaps, visiting her when his work brought him in from the desert. Would that be enough for her? Surely, he would not offer her more. Once he saw how Society would treat her, he would understand he could not be so gallant with his intentions.

Still, the last two nights had proven how wonderful it was to be loved by Alex Grayfield. It was more than a physical experience. She'd felt cared for, cherished in his arms. She knew enough now to confirm what she'd

expected earlier. Her feelings for Alex had grown beyond the physical. For better or for worse, she had traveled far and fast down the path of love.

She reached up to his face and kissed him softly on the lips. “Thank you for everything, Alex.” It was as close as she dared come to saying “I love you.” Then she was gone, slipping out into the camp, hugging her hope as she went, Alex’s words a mantra in her mind. *You are mine and no other’s.*

Chapter VIII

“He covets her, Muhsin. And I think she is not indifferent to the Christian dog.” Bassam took a sloppy sip of wine and reclined against the pillows in his brother-in-law’s tent. They were alone in the quiet part of the afternoon and he was free to speak his mind at last. “You have lost your prized horse to the one. If you are not careful, you will lose your houri too.”

The sheikh shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of nonchalance. “The blond one is cognizant of our ways. He would not dare to intrude in that domain.”

Bassam narrowed his eyes in thoughtful contemplation. “Beneath his robes, behind his flawless command of the language, he is an Englishman. That is a fact best not forgotten.” He studied Muhsin. His brother-in-law was much taken with the blond newcomer and with his dark-haired companion. It was making him careless.

“The *moussem* will be over soon and they will go their way.” Muhsin reasoned.

“With your favorite horse.”

Muhsin laughed. “Do you think I’d be sitting here so calmly if I meant to let them actually take the horse?”

Bassam relaxed slightly. That sounded more like the brother-in-law he knew. “And your English houri? Will she stay behind too?”

Muhsin’s eyes darkened at the mention of his latest acquisition. “I have told her my patience is up. After the *moussem* she is to be mine in truth. She is an untouched gem, all that a virile man desires.”

“Like the houris promised by the Koran in the after-life.” Bassam mused, “Modest, voluptuous and untouched by another, her body without the blemishes of childbirth.” He eyed Muhsin speculatively. “What if she’s been touched by another after all?”

“She has not. My physician has vouched for her chastity.” Muhsin contested.

“That was months ago.” Bassam played idly with a cluster of grapes. “I did not exaggerate when I said you stood to lose your horse and your houri.

Last night, she went to the Englishman's tent while his friend kept us at cards. She was there a long while."

The sheikh's face darkened with anger. "How do you know this?"

"I saw the desire in the Englishman's face the first night she danced. I had her followed, for her protection, of course, in case the Englishman forced his attentions upon her." Bassam said slyly. "But last night, there was no forcing. She went to him."

Bassam watched the implications become clear to Muhsin. After a calculated silence, Bassam spoke. "She has abused your generosity and patience. She has shamed you by giving herself to an infidel."

The English bitch had shown him nothing but disdain since her arrival in camp, Bassam thought. A woman in her precarious position should have welcomed the bargain he'd been willing to make her. But she'd shunned him just as she'd shunned his powerful brother-in-law. She would soon learn her place. She would soon see that the power of her wiles extended only so far, and that the real power over life and death, freedom and captivity, lay with him. She would regret her choice to go it alone.

Muhsin's anger grew. "She favors the Englishman over me? She favors a meager *horse trader*?"

"It is perhaps more than that." Bassam insinuated. The seed of doubt had been planted and he nurtured it with his other suspicions. "The two newcomers are more than horse traders, don't you think?"

He had all of Muhsin's attention now. "What do you suspect they're hiding?"

"They've come for her, perhaps? Maybe they have been sent to find out the truth about the entourage that disappeared in the desert? Perhaps they've come to finish what the entourage started? They've come to ferret out alliances and see where the tribes will side?"

"Spies? Is this what they do in exchange for my hospitality? I have welcomed them into my tent and shared the hookah with them."

Bassam nodded solemnly. "They have misused the hospitality of the desert quite horribly. Punishment would not be out of order. The *moussem* ends tomorrow, it would be a good time to make an example out of them, to show the tribes what it means to defy Sheikh Muhsin ibn Bitar."

Muhsin was thoughtful. "Yes, I think you may be right about that. I will start with the captive tonight."

A wicked gleam lit Bassam's eyes. "She can be used to draw the Englishman out and force him to perjure himself. If she is known to be in jeopardy, he may show his hand."

Something was wrong. Susannah stumbled in the sand, fighting against the strong grip of Bassam's hand about her wrist. He was angry. This was no polite escort and she could only speculate why.

She had danced tonight for the sheikh, as always, had pleased the audience. It was the last time she'd have to dance in that manner. Tomorrow she'd be free. Alex would make his request tonight as the men sat and talked. Had he already made his request? Was that why Bassam had come for her without warning?

"You have defiled yourself with an Englishman, without permission. Now, you will pay." Bassam jerked her to an abrupt halt outside the sheikh's tent. His face was close to her. She could smell the residue of spices on his breath, the gaminess of the roasted lamb. She fought the urge to cringe. She could not afford to show weakness in front of Bassam.

He forced himself upon her lips, his mouth demanding she open to him. She struggled against him, twisting her head to avoid contact. She kicked out with her foot, but Bassam was too swift. He pinioned her against him. "You're a feisty one, and I find I am less discerning than my brother-in-law. I do not care that I have not had you first, only that I have you next and last. I can still save you. Remember that before you lash out." He bit at her ear, nothing like the loving nips Alex had showered her with. She stifled a yelp against his harsh methods.

Where was Alex now? She hoped he was safe. Somehow the sheikh knew what they had done. Had Alex made his request yet?

Bassam pushed her inside the tent and she scanned the interior rapidly. Alex was there, seated across from the shiekh. He was alone. Crispin was not present. Alex sat erect, his body hard and alert. He was aware that the situation had become hostile. But even so, his presence buoyed her hope. She took courage from his cool assurance as he eyed the sheikh unflinchingly. Alex would not fail her.

"Is this how you treat your guests? I have come to barter with you honestly for a lowly slave in your possession." Alex charged, taking the offensive as she was thrust into the center of the conversation.

She met his eyes with a quick glance, but he shifted his gaze away. Probably a smart choice. Susannah averted her own eyes to the floor, unwilling to give away more emotion than she wanted. Her freedom lay in the balance, dependent now upon the wits of Alex Grayfield. A wrong glance from her, a wrong word, would seal not only her fate but his. They were now irrevocably linked together.

“You have taken her without my permission. You’ve lain with her and befouled her.”

“And I am willing to do my duty by her.” Alex replied evenly, showing no agitation at the harsh words meant to provoke. “I will take her from your sight.”

“That is not all.” Muhsin held up a hand. “She has committed an act of defiance against me. I have it on good authority that *she* went to you, she sought your bed willingly.” He gave a manly shrug. “If it had been simply a matter between men, we could have settled it between ourselves,” he said benevolently, although Susannah doubted it would have been as simple as he made it sound. “But a woman’s dishonor combined with a slave’s disobedience must be accounted for lest others find me weak and seek to try me in kind.”

The look Muhsin cast her chilled her in spite of the tent’s heat. She heard the implicit deal Muhsin was willing to contract with Alex. She would be made to pay most horribly. If Alex confessed she’d come to him, he could pass unscathed as long as he left.

Alex said nothing, and Susannah breathed more easily. She wanted to trust Alex, but the offer had to be tempting. The sheikh spoke again. “You have in your possession a horse I admire. Relinquish the horse and that would cover any misunderstanding between us.”

Again the implicit opportunity to deny her, to lay the blame entirely at her feet; she had seduced him and he had not understood the inappropriateness of the seduction. Susannah clenched her hands to keep them from trembling. Surely Alex would not betray her? He’d promised. But what did she know of the man? Was he a man of his word or would he seek to save himself at her expense? Her mind warned that she knew nothing of him, a man who had wandered in from the desert two days ago.

But her heart argued otherwise. The man so concerned with her pleasure, who worshiped her body so reverently, was a man of sincerity and honor. Whatever he did with her afterwards, he would not leave her here to

face a cruel fate at Bassam's hands. She knew what awaited her if he denied her—public punishment and the private humiliations Bassam would heap upon her. She could imagine too what awaited Alex if he did not deny her. At the very least there would be trial by fire, the Bedouin tradition for truth-telling, at the worst he would be ruined as a man unless she could intervene.

"Will you play me for her? She is not one of you. Your codes are not her codes. Whatever she has done, let me at least play for her. I fancy her and, unlike you, I am not repulsed by her sin." Alex said with cool casualness.

"No cards," The sheikh laughed, warming to the idea of a competition. "If you're as good as your friend, it is hardly fair."

"Weapons then. We are all fair hands with knives." Alex suggested. "You and Bassam against Crispin and myself."

"It is dark."

"The tent is large. We can set targets at the far end." Alex countered.

The sheikh glanced at Bassam. "What do you say?"

Bassam grinned. "Take the challenge. If they win, they may take the girl. If they lose, they will leave camp before sun-up, happy to be alive and praising the sheikh's generosity."

Susannah fought the urge to seek out Alex's gaze. Her fate balanced literally and metaphorically on the point of a knife, and she, a woman used to taking care of herself, could do nothing about it but watch and wait.

Chapter IX

It was to be a private competition between the four of them, but it was no less tense for the lack of spectators.

Alex critically watched the targets being prepared by a trusted relative of the sheikh. He resented being unable to go to Susannah, who'd been manhandled roughly to the side to sit under guard.

She'd borne up stoically under the crass negotiations. She'd kept her eyes modestly downcast throughout the transaction, but he knew she'd heard the unspoken messages as well. As Sutcliffe's daughter she would have been trained to read between the lines. He'd feared at one point she would protest and give herself up out of some misguided effort to save him. Such a sacrifice might have momentarily cleansed the conscience but it would have done little to alter the situation. She'd shown great insight and understanding to know enough to withhold her reaction.

"Is she worth it?" Cris spoke in low tones at his ear, passing him a throwing knife. Crispin Ramsden was a saint among men, Alex thought, a tarnished saint to be sure, but a saint all the same. He'd come without question ready to defend Alex's interests. Alex knew no finer gentleman than the rough-edged brother to the powerful Earl of Dursley.

"Yes." Alex replied. Everything was in that answer. He hazarded a glance at Susannah. He had not imagined himself to be a man open to love at first sight. In that regard, he'd believed himself to be much like Crispin, a cynical lover of women, quick to take pleasure but less hasty to bind himself to one in any permanent fashion. Yet a woman like Susannah demanded more, and he found he was more than willing to give it.

She was beauty personified with her pale-gold hair and houri curves. But she was more than beauty. Her blue eyes were windows into mystery and intelligence. Without him realizing it, she had become an essential part of his plans for the future.

"We have to get out of here alive first." Crispin commented. "You're already planning your life together. Let's work on the present."

Alex laughed. "My apologies for being so transparent."

“A man in love always is.” Crispin hefted a knife, testing its weight and balance. “I’ve seen it before. When my brother fell in love with Tessa, it was fast and deadly.”

“You talk about it as if it’s a disease, spreading like cholera.”

“Well?” Crispin challenged.

“We’ll find you a woman next.”

Satisfied with their weapons, their talk turned serious in the moments they had left. The targets were nearly set.

“What’s the plan if we lose?” Cris inquired, baring his teeth at a glaring Bassam across the tent.

“The same as if we win. It won’t matter to them. They’re not letting us go easily.”

“Is this the ride-like-hell option you spoke of earlier?”

“Yes. Any chance our horses are close?”

“The black is outside. The sheikh thinks I’ve brought him to return him. The other two horses are in the rope pen behind the sheikh’s tent where we left them when we rode in.”

Alex spoke rapidly. “Susannah and I will make for the horse pen. You take the black and ride out. Don’t wait for us.”

Crispin nodded, understanding the necessity. If he rode out on the prized horse, he could be a successful diversion. “I’ll see you in Algiers then, my friend.”

All was ready. The targets were at thirty paces, a distance that would require a strong arm as well as accurate aim. Additional torches had been brought to the tent to ensure quality lighting. The flames also increased the temperature. Alex could feel sweat beading his brow in response to the additional heat.

The rules were simple. Each of them had four throws. The best combination of throws would determine the victor. Bassam threw first, two of his knives finding purchase on the second ring of the target, one of them on the outside ring, the final knife successfully finding the ring closest to the center.

Crispin tossed the man a look of disdain as if to say, *Is that the best you can do?* He stepped up to the line and sighted his target, throwing methodically, his arm in a guaranteed rhythm. Three of his knives gained the closest circle from the center, making the one knife of Bassam’s look like a lucky strike compared to the expert accuracy of his. His fourth knife

fell short of excellence and joined Bassam's in the second outer circle, but he'd still bested the sheikh's brother-in-law.

Alex gave Crispin a grateful nod. Cris had not failed him. They were ahead, three knives to one. But the sheikh remained. Alex had taken his measure carefully during the competitions the day before. Muhsin ibn Bitar was a fine knife-thrower; no one but himself had matched the sheikh. Even then, their competition had been a draw.

Undaunted by Crispin's excellence, Muhsin toed his mark and sighted the target. He threw slowly and with deadly accuracy. His first knife hit the bull's-eye and he cast a mocking glance at Susannah. His second knife sliced the ring closest to the center where most of Crispin's had fallen. But his last two throws were devastating, both of them hitting the center target.

So be it. Susannah was pale on the sidelines. This would be difficult indeed. The problem with throwing last, Alex thought, was that he would know if he'd lost after he'd thrown two knives. If at least one of them was a bull's-eye, he was still in. If neither hit a bull's-eye, the other two throws mattered not at all. Alex drew a deep breath. He had his methods and it would not do to deviate now.

Susannah held her breath, marveling at Alex's calm. In his turban and robes he might be one of them, so seamlessly did he fit in. Only the sharp green of his eyes and the sun-streaked hair that she knew lay beneath the winding wrap of his turban betrayed him as belonging to another world. She tried not to think of that world. It was a world in which she was no longer sure of her place.

Her renowned father was dead. Would she be welcome in his circles abroad? She could perhaps see herself making a quiet home in Italy or in Cairo where her experience in the desert wouldn't matter as greatly. Or would she be forced home to England and her mother's people? There would be pity there but no acceptance. They were strict people, doggedly adhering to the moral codes of Society. A Bedouin captive, a woman who'd lived without chaperone in a society they'd deem as immoral would not be suitable to their world. But all that remained to be seen, all of it resting on Alex's broad shoulders.

He stepped to the mark and stared hard at his target for long moments. All four knives were in his belt and he pulled forth the first one now and tossed it lightly in his hand. The wait was maddening. Without warning, he

threw the first one, hard and sure towards the target. In rapid succession he drew the other three. He fired without hesitation. His movements mesmerized. He threw quickly and without thought, unlike the others, who'd deliberated before each throw.

There was no time to think, to register the landing of the knives. Later, she'd realize he'd planned it that way. He'd guessed all along that neither victory nor defeat would matter. The sheikh would not simply let him leave with her if he won. Neither would Alex simply walk away without her if he lost.

The speed of his throws was utterly distracting. He'd moved to her side before anyone realized it. The man in charge of the targets was busy tallying the scores. But Alex was pushing her towards the tent entrance behind them.

Crispin was already there, arms crossed and legs spread, ostensibly awaiting the pronouncement of victory.

Alex had just gently shoved Susannah into the darkness outside when the cry inside erupted.

"We have won, have we not?" Alex heard Crispin's challenge. "We're free to go."

There were harsh words and the commotion of a fight. Alex was torn between the need to go back and assist Crispin or to stay with Susannah. Crispin could handle himself in a fight. His sacrifice would be for nothing if he and Susannah did not get away.

"Quick, the horse pen." He ushered her forward in the dark, holding her firmly when she stumbled.

In the end, there wasn't time to get both horses. The animals were skittish with the camels so near them and Alex had trouble calming his stallion down long enough to throw Susannah up. A challenging neigh in the darkness warned Alex Crispin had made his getaway. He swung up behind Susannah and kicked his horse into organized motion, leaning sideways and slicing an exit in the rope pen with a knife he'd secreted up his sleeve. He'd never, ever intended to fight fairly.

The opening in the pen full of camel-skittish horses had the desired effect. The animals spilled out into the camp in a rampage, taking the revelers unawares. But the distraction did not entirely ensure their escape. Bassam sighted them and raised the alarm.

Alex kicked his horse into a gallop, taking his chances with speed. If they could clear the camp, they would make it. But he needed a lead in order to get to the cache he'd stashed earlier in the day. Without those supplies, the desert would finish them off as surely as Bassam's knife.

Luck was with them. They cleared the camp and the rampaging horses ensured that no one had the speed to follow them into the desert. With more luck, the sheikh would assume they had no supplies, that their flight was precipitous and poorly thought out, and he would leave them to their demise.

Alex spotted the formation he'd used to mark his cache. He pulled the horse to a halt and slid off. "We made it." He grinned up at Susannah, pale but game on the back of the stallion, her hair a tumble of gold in the moonlight. She'd never looked lovelier to him.

"We won't survive without water. It's days back to Algiers." She said matter-of-factly.

Alex's grin widened. "I left supplies here today, in anticipation of our flight tomorrow. It's a good thing I plan ahead." He dug in the soft sand until he came up with wineskins and saddlebags of food. He passed them up to her and watched her settle them across the horse's withers.

She smiled, and he noted her tension had seeped away at the sight of water. Alex swung up behind her, ready to ride again. There was still distance to put between them and the camp. "Once we're safely away, I have some other plans I've made for you." He murmured in her ear.

She pressed her back against him and he savored the feel of her body nestled against him, close and intimate, her buttocks to his groin. He felt himself harden instinctively, but that would have to wait.

He urged his horse to a trotting pace. If they traveled by day they'd have to walk to save the horse from sweating too much, but in the cool of a desert night, they could manage the speed and right now they needed it.

"Will Crispin be all right?" Susannah asked when it became apparent he wasn't joining them.

"Crispin's always all right. He has a stash too. He'll see us in Algiers." Alex answered confidently.

She sighed, her head moving sleepily against him. "You won, you know. All four knives were bull's-eyes."

She drowsed against him and Alex welcomed her weight. She was his. Just as soon as they reached Algiers, he'd make it legal.

Somewhere between the last of the night and sunrise, he found a cave with enough room for the horse to be comfortable during the hot day. It would do, for his horse and for him. The excitement of the evening's events and the woman he carried with him still fired his loins, seeking relief.

Inside the cave, he made their meager encampment, laying down a blanket for their bed. He laid Susannah gently upon it and she stirred at the movement, looking up at him through sleepy eyes. She reached for him. "Come to bed, Alex."

Four simple words, and yet the most powerful aphrodisiac he'd ever experienced, the words of a woman inviting a man to bed.

In a swift movement, he shrugged out of his robes and fell naked beside her in acceptance of the invitation. She snuggled beside him, her sleepiness disappearing. "You saved us, Alex." She kissed him hard on the mouth, a hand dropping low between them.

Alex groaned appreciatively. Her hand moved to stroke his length, massaging, arousing, if it was possible to be aroused further. Suddenly, she rolled over and straddled him. "I was thinking about this as we rode tonight," she whispered, letting her hair fall forward and tickle his nipples. "I was thinking that I could ride you like a horse, like a stallion."

"You could," Alex grinned as she teased.

"And I was thinking," she continued, bending to kiss him on the mouth, "that while I was up here, I could do...other things...."

Alex's reply was hoarse. "You could," he managed. But his permission was hardly necessary. She'd already started the journey downwards, trailing kisses down his chest, her breath feathering his navel, her lips pressing either side of his thighs and then finally reaching their destination.

She tested tentatively at first, her lips a mere flutter on the sensitive head of him. Then firmer as she took all of him, sucking and licking until Alex cried out into the night. This was an ecstasy beyond words and he reveled in her boldness.

When he could stand it no longer, he urged her head up and pulled her above him, letting her take his length inside her and begin to ride towards fulfillment. As the sun rose outside the cave, Alex took them both to completion, her body collapsing against him, satiated.

They spent the day in the cave. The sun was too hot to make travel worthwhile. There was little to do but make love and talk, not that Alex

minded. When he was with Susannah, he was discovering he wanted to do little else.

“Where will you go when we reach Algiers?” Susannah asked, playing idly with the flat of his aureole.

“Cairo. My family lives there, and you’ll want to meet them. But there will be reports to make in Algiers. We’ll be there a while.”

“We?” Susannah lifted her head, her sea-blue eyes curious.

“Us.” Alex smiled softly. “I plan to marry you once we reach civilization. If you’ll have me?” He levered up on one arm. “Susannah Sutcliffe, will you marry me? I cannot guarantee a life rich in wealth, but I can promise a life rich in adventure.”

She laughed, but turned her gaze away. “The sun has touched you, Alex. You hardly know me and you must know that no one will consider me suitable. I’m damaged goods.”

Alex snorted at that. “And what am I? I am no lord’s son. I’m the son of a diplomat, who hopes to be a diplomat himself. Perhaps we’ve got a viscount grandfather somewhere in the family tree, but it’s a tenuous claim to Society at best, and it’s not a connection I trade on.” Then he sobered, another thought striking him. “Perhaps you do not wish to marry me?” He had not anticipated her refusal. He was not a man who dwelt on failure. He had not thought of losing the knife contest just as he had not thought of losing her. They were both impossibilities to him.

She smiled softly. “I do not wish to hinder you, Alex. I recognized at once that first night I danced before you that you were a man of honor...”

Alex was in no mood to talk about his honor. “I want you, Susannah. Your intelligence and your courage. You are an incredible woman, and I want you to be mine.” He reached for her, a hand behind her neck, pulling her to him for a kiss that spanned the chasm of her doubt. “Magic like this doesn’t happen every day, Susannah.” He whispered into her mouth. She stared at him, searching his eyes and slowly a smile of pure happiness spread across her face. He actually looked nervous. It had seemed impossible, but it was true. She was loved.

“Yes, Alex,” She whispered back, her body molding to his as he rolled her beneath him. “Yes, I will marry you and be yours.”

Glowing with relief, Alex moved to claim her, rising above her in man’s age-old possession of a woman, a possession as ancient as the desert itself. He thrust deeply, finding his homecoming in her warmth. “Mine.”

Ah, but he loved the desert.

Epilogue

A few months later, Algiers

“I am told I must call you ‘sir’ now.” Crispin sighed dramatically. He leaned on the rail of the little balcony of Alex’s apartments looking out over the bay. A fresh wind blew off the water as the two friends said their farewells.

Alex nodded, smiling. “It was something of a surprise. London moved pretty quickly.” He shot a sidelong glance at his friend. “I wonder if your brother had something to do that.”

Crispin made a noncommittal gesture with his shoulders. “Maybe. I happened to mention something to Peyton about your latest exploits in my last letter home.”

“Well, thank you. Susannah and I will be moving to the consulate in Cairo in a few weeks. It will be good to be home and among my family.” Alex confessed.

Crispin elbowed him good-naturedly. “I told you you’d come out of this like a hero.”

“What about you? How will you come out of this?” Alex asked.

“I’m headed home, by way of Greece. But headed home, nonetheless. It’s time.”

Alex nodded. Crispin had received news of an inheritance a while back and had dawdled over claiming it. There were issues to settle with his brother, Peyton, and issues to settle within himself that had delayed his going home. Cris didn’t talk much about it, but Alex knew he struggled with his own sense of identity. A man couldn’t wander alone forever.

He knew that better than anyone now that he had Susannah. The sun sank low over the harbor and Crispin turned from the railing. “I’ll go now and leave you to your lovely wife.”

They embraced as brothers and Alex saw him downstairs, laughing when Crispin mounted up on the ‘stolen’ black stallion. “Did you ever

name the beast?"

"I named him Sheikh. Seemed fitting." Crispin winked and set off down the street.

It would be the last time in years that Alex would see Crispin. But his future lay upstairs in Susannah's arms and he took the steps two at a time.

Susannah waited for him, listening for his footsteps on the stairs. He would be lonely when he returned. But she would see to it that he would not be lonely for long. In his absence, she'd lit candles in the bedroom and unbound her hair. She slipped on a dressing gown of thinnest linen, knowing full well the effect of the material in the candlelight and the effect on him.

She heard him enter the apartments and call her name.

"I'm in here, my love." Susannah moved to the doorway, her hands outstretched, reaching for him. He was handsome in the flickering light, the candles illuminating the leonine hues of his hair. She felt her need for him rise. In the months since their marriage, the hungry edge of their passion had not ebbed as she had thought it would, nor had it mellowed with the ordinary pace of days.

She took his hands and drew him to her and through the door to their bedchamber. She was fast learning there was nothing ordinary about life with Alex Grayfield. In bed or out, he was an extraordinary man with whom she'd found a passionate and intellectual partnership.

"Come, I have wine and cheese." She pushed him gently down to the big bed and shrugged provocatively out of the dressing gown, letting it slide down the length of her body, reveling in the naked desire that sprang to life in her husband's eyes.

She came to him, straddling him, stripping away his garments until his body was bare before her. Susannah reached for the decanter of wine. Alex raised his eyebrow in sensual query. She smiled in answer. "Wine is good for other things than drinking." She poured out a bit onto his body and bent her head to him, loving him the way he loved her – the way everyone wants to be loved in their life.

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Arabian Nights with a Rake

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